

The Bourgeois Frontier
French Towns, French Traders, and American Expansion

By Jay Gitlin

(New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009. Pp. xiv, 269. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00.)

The Bourgeois Frontier focuses on the Chouteau family and its important role in American expansion, from the founding of St. Louis by the family patriarch to the death of its last matriarch, Emilie Anne (née Gratiot), in 1862. Jay Gitlin uses the Chouteaus' history as an emblematic narrative of the integration of French fur traders into the increasingly Americanized West in the decades between the American Revolution and the Civil War. His primary goal is to dispel the belief that the French had vanished into the creolized and mixed-race lower classes of the frontier after 1763—a myth perpetuated well before Francis Parkman concretized it in his seven volumes on the French in America in the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

Gitlin notes that St. Louis, which would become the hub city of the "Creole Corridor" running from Quebec to New Orleans, was in fact founded by the Chouteau clan after the 1764 cession of Louisiana to Spain. Subsequently, the town and its surrounding territory drew French settlers from throughout the West, Canada, and France, as well as Anglo-American immigrants, who settled there in growing numbers after the 1803 Louisiana Purchase. Through careful documentation, Gitlin shows

how the family learned to profit from its role as brokers between the Anglos and Native Americans, as the commodities in question shifted from furs to land to mining rights. Other French and even some Métis traders are mentioned as well, but Gitlin never strays far from the Chouteaus.

Gitlin's most compelling chapter focuses on the family's opportunistic turn to the Southwest, well in advance of large-scale Anglo regional penetration along the Santa Fe Trail. When the Anglos finally did arrive in New Mexico in the 1830s, they found themselves bargaining with the same French families they had encountered to the east a generation before. The French ability and willingness to engage Indians in non-confrontational matters eased the settlement process for a great many tribes, from the Shawnee and the Osage to the Comanche and the Cheyenne.

As family history becomes western history, the Chouteaus multiply, marrying wisely with Anglos, Indians, and other French entrepreneurs, expanding the family and its businesses from remote frontier outposts to New York to Paris. Here, however, is one of the book's shortcomings. While reading, I found myself needing Shirley Christian's *Before Lewis*

and Clark: *The Story of the Chouteaus and the French Dynasty that Ruled America's Frontier* (2004) for, if nothing else, its Chouteau family tree. Gitlin's omission of any citation to Christian's thoroughly researched (if not necessarily scholarly) book is representative of his somewhat problematic relation to contemporary scholarship, much of which has focused on issues of race and slavery. Gitlin's is an older type of story, one that narrates the rise of a family business and examines the nuts and bolts of economic ventures but gives scant attention to the slaves and laborers who made these ventures work.

When race does become a central issue as the Civil War approaches, internal family struggles over alliances and abolition seem sudden and under-contextualized. Dred Scott's owner was a Chouteau son-in-law, and although the case is mentioned several times, it is never linked to larger family attitudes toward slavery or any other political, economic, or social issues. As the book's title suggests, Gitlin's emphasis is on the

bourgeois French elite who retained the older cultural values of the French frontier, as the lower classes were absorbed into the American working class or simply pushed west with their Indian relatives. In that sense, Gitlin has stayed within the limits of his topic.

The Bourgeois Frontier's strengths and weaknesses are epitomized by the image of a sumptuous steamship's ballroom on its cover. While its grandeur is undeniable and the beautifully dressed Creoles sauntering about are recognizable from Gitlin's study, the well-dressed and dark-skinned slaves waiting table and the bartender in shirtsleeves remain relative strangers. This is a well-researched and well-written book about a colonial culture whose last visible remnant was its elite.

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Heartland Utopias

By Robert P. Sutton

(DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009. Pp. 224. Notes, selected bibliography, index. \$32.00.)

If a book is to be judged by the goals it sets, then Robert P. Sutton's *Heartland Utopias* is deserving of praise. As the author explains in his conclusion, the volume is "not intended to be a

new theoretical analysis of utopian communalism"; rather, its purpose is "to summarize the importance of communal societies to the history of the heartland in light of the over-